

Spartacus: my part in his downfall

Andrew Sillett

Cicero's prosecution of Verres is usually seen as Cicero himself presents it – a principled defence of Rome's provincial subjects against the greed of a corrupt fellow-Roman. But was there more to it than that? Andrew Sillett investigates.

On the first day of 70 B.C., Gaius Verres' term as governor of Sicily came to an end. As the wintry seas rocked the boats carrying Verres and his retinue back to Rome, his mind must have turned to what awaited him on his return. On a good day, Verres could think about how close he was to reaching the summit of Rome's political cursus honorum, despite his family's relative political obscurity. Every year the Roman people, using a voting system that gave significant clout to the city's wealthy elite, elected two consuls from among the pool of men who had (like Verres) held the praetorship. A man who had made important friends among the winners of Rome's recent Civil War, who had administered justice in the city and who had been entrusted with the well-being of Rome's nearest and dearest province for three years was bound to be in with a good shot at winning Roman politics' most valued prize.

As it happens, however, Verres was greeted on his return to Rome with the news that he was to stand trial on a charge of having extorted the inhabitants of Sicily during his three years governing the province. Almost as soon as Verres' governorship (which gave him immunity from prosecution) had ended, an up and coming senator named Marcus Tullius Cicero had convinced the praetor in charge of the extortion court that Verres had a case to answer, and won the right to lead the prosecution.

The case for the prosecution

What happened next is famous. Cicero assembled a formidable case against Verres, detailing his lifetime of deceit, savagery, and kleptomania. Verres gathered up what possessions he could and departed to live out a comfortable life in Massilia (modern Marseilles), a popular destination for exiled members of the Roman elite. Cicero meanwhile continued

his ascent through Rome's political offices, being elected one of the two consuls of 63 B.C. (see Gesine Manuwald's article elsewhere in this issue).

Almost everything we now know about Gaius Verres comes from the seven prosecution speeches that Cicero published in the aftermath of his victory (these *Verrines* alone comprise approximately a quarter of all Cicero's surviving oratory). As a result of this, history's judgement upon the man is set – he is the archetype of the corrupt governor. When Livy set out to depict imperial abuses in the early days of Rome's overseas adventures he invited comparisons with Cicero's portrayal of Verres. Centuries later when Edmund Burke led the impeachment of Warren Hastings, the Governor-General of Bengal, he drew inspiration from the *Verrines* and was depicted as Cicero reborn in satirical pamphlets of the time.

Defending the indefensible?

The weight of evidence Cicero gathered against Verres is immense, but is it fair to judge the man without hearing his defence? It is commonly argued (albeit only on the evidence of a much later commentary on the speech) that Verres fled Rome before his advocate could speak a word in his defence. This seems to be contradicted by the claim found in Quintilian, a professor of rhetoric under the emperor Hadrian and a Ciceronian fanboy extraordinaire, that Hortensius' speech *Pro Verre* was still in circulation. If a defence of Verres was mounted, what did it look like? How did Hortensius go about defending the seemingly indefensible?

The task of reconstructing such a defence has been made easier by the recent publication of a new volume of the fragments from Sallust's *Histories*, a grand narrative history of the late Roman Republic. The reconstruction of Sallust's

eyewitness history of the 70s B.C. provides some potential answers that can help to explain how Hortensius could have gone about defending Verres and indeed help us to understand why Verres behaved in the way he did while holding his command in Sicily.

On the face of it, the fragments of Sallust's *Histories* do not have a great deal to say about Verres; the index turns up just one solitary reference. This sentence, however, has a great deal to tell us (?) about how we can go about reconstructing a non-Ciceronian Verres. This passage from book 4 (covering the years 72–68 B.C.) runs as follows:

C. Verres litora Italia propinqua firmavit.
Gaius Verres fortified the shores near Italy.

On the basis of these six words, I would like to propose the outline of how Verres' command in Sicily could be defended before a Roman jury.

The key to understanding why Sallust makes this reference to Verres' governorship of Sicily lies in one word that never appears in Cicero's account: Spartacus.

The slaves are revolting

In the first year of Verres' Sicilian command, Spartacus, a Thracian gladiator enslaved in Capua, some 15 miles north of modern Naples, led a revolt against his captors. As Verres reached his new province, four of his successors as praetors at Rome were sent south to put an end to Spartacus' revolt. Their miserable failure to do so helped swell Spartacus' forces as the poor and desperate threw their lot in with the runaway gladiator and his band. Over the next few months, Spartacus' army repeatedly defeated the armies sent against him and had the run of the entire Italian peninsula. By the end of 72 this was no longer Spartacus' Revolt, it was the Third Servile War.

As the name suggests, this was not the first war that had been waged against the Roman Empire's revolting slaves. Thirty years before Spartacus seized control of southern Italy, an army of more than 20,000 slaves caused havoc across Sicily,

and less than thirty years before that the same island was overrun by an insurrection of slaves that Diodorus Siculus numbered at 200,000. Sicily was the natural home for Rome's slave revolts. The island's broad fertile plain encouraged much higher concentrations of agricultural slaves than on the mainland, making it a tinderbox for revolution.

Against this background, Verres' task as governor of the island seems simple – he had to prevent the contagion of Spartacus' revolt from spreading to Sicily. Verres' measures to keep the spark of revolt away from the gunpowder-store that was Sicily's vast slave holdings must be what Sallust is referring to when he describes Verres fortifying the island's Italy-facing sea defences. Some evidence of Verres' work in securing this part of the island squirms through Cicero's polemic, most notably in his attacks on the outrageous favouritism Verres allegedly showed to the town Messina.

Throughout his speeches, Cicero attacks Verres for exacting huge amounts of grain from the island's farmers, in spite of the fact that (as Cicero well knew) Verres was under specific instructions from the Senate to do so in order to relieve the famine that was afflicting Italy at the time. In spite of this universal extraction, he notes that Verres made an exception for Messina, and alleges that this favouritism was the result of a bribe. The photograph above offers another suggestion why Messina was treated with kid-gloves by Verres: the strait that runs between Italy and Sicily is at this point less than two miles wide.

Here is Plutarch on the subject of Spartacus' plans:

At the Straits, [Spartacus] chanced upon some Cilician pirate craft, and determined to seize Sicily. By throwing two thousand men into the island, he thought to kindle anew the servile war there, which had not long been extinguished, and needed only a little additional fuel.

Plutarch *Life of Crassus* 10.3.

Verres' pandering to the landowners of Messina was not a result of corruption: winning their loyalty was a military necessity.

Verres' efforts seem to have succeeded. The ancient sources on Spartacus' revolt (Appian, Plutarch, Sallust, and Florus) all say that Crassus and Pompey's final, decisive victories over Spartacus in 71 B.C. depended on their ability to pin his army down in the toe of Italy.

Why were they pinned down? Again, the sources speak with one voice – Spartacus' forces were unable to make the short crossing to Sicily. The pirates whom Spartacus had paid to transport his army to Sicily did not fancy their chances of making a successful landing and aban-

doned Spartacus' men on the wrong side of the channel. Thwarted by Verres' defences, Spartacus' men faced the Roman legions once more with grim determination. They were beaten, captured and, famously, crucified.

'Hurling a war hero under the bus'?

Could Verres have predicted that his valiant efforts defending Rome's Empire would be rewarded with prosecution? Possibly. It was certainly not unheard of for Rome's generals to be met with prosecution when they got home. Usually the hopeless task of prosecuting a war hero was undertaken by an ambitious teenager seeking to build a reputation for oratorical excellence; the general's aristocratic friends would have no trouble sweeping aside this challenge, but if the lad put up a good fight his name would be noted for future reference.

For instance, Manius Aquilius, the man who put an end to the Second Servile War thirty years before Verres' own efforts, was prosecuted for corruption upon his return. He was acquitted when his advocate Antonius (grandfather of Marc Antony), after detailing Aquilius' heroics in the war, pulled open his client's tunic revealing the scars he had received warring down the slaves.

What kept Verres from being similarly rescued by Hortensius? In a word, Cicero. Who could have predicted that a senator in his mid 30s would elbow all younger challengers out of the way in order to gain the right to prosecute the returning general? In his prosecution speeches Cicero protests (at great length) that he is prosecuting Verres because the Sicilians begged him to do so.

It does not take a great deal of imagination, however, to feel that this may not be the whole story. Would the imprecations of a few wealthy Sicilians really be enough to convince Cicero to hurl a war hero under the bus? Cicero's ambitions offer a simpler explanation for his unusual behaviour. In 70 B.C. Cicero had hit something of a glass ceiling to his oratorical career. While he had no trouble finding clients among the non-Roman elite of Italy, he had never yet been asked to defend a fellow Roman senator in a court of law.

Senators' go-to advocate was the great Hortensius, whose services Verres himself had secured. Securing the right to prosecute Verres allowed Cicero to face off against the man who was always ahead of him at the front of the barrister's taxi rank. Cicero's prosecution of Verres was opportunistic, tendentious, and carried out in supremely bad faith. He ignores the martial conditions under which Verres was working and presents the governor as a subhuman epitome of greed.

His shameless assault on Verres' char-

acter and record was too strong for Hortensius to repel, and the once-distinguished general Verres speedily gathered up his possessions and fled the bailiffs to Marseilles. Before the year was out, Cicero had forgotten his duty of care to Rome's provincials and was helping other returning generals to fight off allegations of corruption and cruelty. In such a way was the life of Verres, the scourge of Spartacus, sacrificed on the altar of Cicero's ambition.

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